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ABSTRACT

The development of children's understanding of the permanence of various social roles was examined in 16 four- and 16 five-year-old children. A social role conservation battery consisting of 12 items on the permanence of self-identity, gender, child and sibling roles was given under three temporal conditions: the past (i.e., when you were a baby, were you the same person - a boy/girl, a son/daughter, a brother/sister?); the near future, defined as four years into the future (i.e., when you are in second grade, will you still be?); and the remote future (i.e., when you grow up, will you still be?) In addition, tasks involving conservation of number and length, conservation of inclusive kinship roles, and kinship definitions of child and sibling were administered. Conservation of self-identity and gender were significantly higher than conservation of either child or sibling roles, and remote future transformations were significantly more difficult than either past or near future ones. Nonconservation of gender was related to perceived changes in kinship roles rather than to a denial of gender permanence per se, and nonconservation of kinship was related to perceived changes from child and sibling roles to parent roles. (Author/SS)

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Conservation of Social Roles in Preschool Children

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Abstract

This study examined the development of four- and five-year-old children's understanding of the permanence of self-identity, gender, child and sibling roles, and the effects of temporal transformations of these roles into the past, near-future, and remote-future. Conservation of self-identity and gender were significantly higher than conservation of either child or sibling roles, and remote-future transformations were significantly more difficult than either past or near-future ones. Nonconservation of gender was related to perceived changes in kinship roles rather than to a denial of gender permanence per se, and nonconservation of kinship was related to perceived changes from child and sibling roles to parent roles. Conservation of kinship roles apparently depends not only on conservation of self-identity and gender, but also on the understanding of the less salient relational features of kinship roles.

Conservation of Social Roles in Preschool Children

The development of children's understanding of the permanence of various social roles has received increased attention recently. This study examined the development of conservation of four social roles, the effects of temporal transformations on these roles, and their relationship to other cognitive tasks. Jordan (1980) distinguished between conservation of single and multiple social roles, with conservation of single roles occurring when children understand the permanence of single roles such as self (or human) identity, gender, and kinship roles of child and sibling. In general, conservation of single social roles is easier than conservation of multiple social roles, which occurs when children understand the permanence of two social roles which exist simultaneously, such as inclusive kinship roles of daughter-sister or father-son. Piaget's (1968) observation that conservation of self-identity was a preoperational acquisition has been supported by studies on self-identity (Guardo & Bohan, 1971), gender (DeVries, 1969; Emmerich, Goldman, Kirsh, & Sharabany, 1977; LaVoie & Andrews, Note 1; Marcus & Overton, 1978; Slaby & Frey, 1975; Thompson, 1975), and child kinship roles (Jordan, 1980). In addition, positive relationships between these social roles and physical conservation have been reported for human identity (DeVries, 1974), gender (DeVries, 1974; LaVoie & Andrews, Note 1; Marcus & Overton, 1978) and kinship (Jordan, Note 2). Since the relationship among all four of these roles has not been addressed, this study examined that relationship, and their relationship to physical conservation. It was predicted that conservation of self-identity and gender would be easier than conservation of kinship roles, since previous research has indicated that non-kinship roles are understood by three- and four-year-old children.

Two types of transformations have been applied to single social roles. One type involves changes in physical appearance, such as changes from human to nonhuman identities (DeVries, 1969) or the assumption (either through pretense, pictures or costumes) of sex-stereotyped roles or attributes of the opposite sex for gender conservation (DeVries, 1969; Emmerich et al., 1977; LaVoie & Andrews, Note 1; Marcus & Overton, 1978; Slaby & Frey, 1975). The other type involves temporal transformations in past and future time directions, and has been applied to self-identity (Guardo & Bohan, 1971), gender (Slaby & Frey, 1975; Thompson, 1975), and child kinship roles (Jordan, 1980). In general, conservation of these roles is more difficult when both types of transformations are extreme, as with actual assumption of opposite-sex characteristics or time changes into the remote future. A comparison between these types of transformations performed on gender roles indicated that conservation of gender was more difficult under changes in physical appearance than under changes into the remote future (Slaby & Frey, 1975). However, with the future time changes in that study, changes in gender were confounded with changes into parent kinship roles by transforming male and female child roles into parent roles upon adulthood. Thus, the findings concerning temporal transformations on gender roles are probably due to nonconservation of kinship, rather than of gender roles. This study eliminated this confounding of gender and kinship roles under future transformations, and applied three temporal transformations into the past, near- and remote-future on self-identity, gender, child and sibling roles. It was predicted that transformations into the remote-future would be more difficult to conserve than those into the past or near-future.

The sample contained 16 four- and 16 five-year-old children ($\bar{X}$ age = 62

months, range = 49 to 72 months), with 8 males and 8 females at each age level. The average mental age of the group, measured on the WPPSI vocabulary scale, was 71 months (range = 51 to 84 months). Most of the children were white and attended either university daycare or public kindergarten classes.

The social role conservation battery consisted of 12 items on the permanence of self-identity, gender, child and sibling roles under three temporal conditions: the past (i.e., when you were a baby, were you the same person, a boy/girl, a son/daughter, and a brother/sister); the near-future, defined as four years into the future (i.e., when you are in second grade, will you still be ____); and the remote-future, defined as when the child becomes a grownup (i.e., when you grow up, will you still be ____). The same-sex questions were presented verbally and each child made a conservation judgment of yes or no and gave an explanation of that judgment. In addition, standard conservation of number and length tasks, conservation of inclusive kinship roles, and kinship definitions of child and sibling were also administered (see Jordan, 1980 for a description of the kinship tasks). The tasks were counterbalanced across all children and each child was tested individually.

The mean number of conservation judgments by type of social role and time direction appears in table 1. The effects of the social roles and time trans-

Insert Table 1 about here

formations were assessed by a 2 x 2 x 4 x 3 repeated measures ANOVA, with age (four- and five-year-olds) and sex as between-subject factors, and type of social role (self-identity, gender, child and sibling) and time direction (past, near-future and remote-future) as within-subject factors. The main effect of

social role was significant, $F(3,78) = 8.10, p < .001$. Newman-Keuls comparisons revealed that conservation of self-identity and gender, and child and sibling roles did not differ from each other, but self-identity and gender were significantly higher than conservation of child and sibling roles, $q_r(78)$ ranged from .345 to 4.81, $p < .05$ for these four pairwise comparisons. The main effect of time direction was significant, $F(2,53) = 5.09, p < .01$, and Newman-Keuls comparisons revealed that remote-future changes were significantly more difficult than near-future changes, $q_r(53) = 4.56, p < .01$, while past and near-future, and past and remote-future changes did not differ from each other. The main effects for age and sex were not significant.

Since there were no age or sex differences on inclusive kinship, number and length conservation, and kinship definitions, scores on these tasks were pooled across these variables. The mean number of conservation judgments on inclusive kinship, total physical conservation, and kinship definitions were 1.91 ($SD = 2.48$, range = 0 to 6), 1.69 ($SD = 1.75$, range = 0 to 6), and 4.26 ($SD = 1.00$, range = 2 to 7) respectively. Social role conservation was significantly correlated with kinship definitions ($r = .44, p < .01$), but was not significantly correlated with inclusive kinship, physical conservation or mental age (r 's were .22, .18 and .21 respectively). These findings differ from previous ones concerning gender and kinship roles and indicate that social role conservation is independent of mental age and conservation status at this age group.

As predicted, conservation of kinship roles was more difficult than conservation of self-identity and gender among preschool children. It appears that self-identity and gender are necessary but not sufficient prerequisites for conservation of kinship roles, since a majority of nonconservation explanations for child and sibling roles referred to changes in kinship roles from

child and sibling to parent, rather than gender, as the basis for their non-conservation judgments. As Jordan (1980) observed, children between five- and seven-years-old also regarded child and sibling roles as dependent on specific generational features rather than on sex, but the older children relied less on generational features for sibling roles than for child roles, while the present group performed equally poorly on both kinship roles. The relatively high degree of nonconservation on inclusive kinship roles supports the observation that children who perceived a discontinuity between future parent roles and their current child and sibling roles may have done so partly on the basis of their denial of the existence of inclusive kinship roles.

As predicted, conservation of social roles was also more difficult under remote-future time transformations, a finding which is consistent with previous research on self-identity, gender and kinship roles. Nonconservation explanations on self-identity in the remote-future referred to changes in size or appearance, while nonconservation explanations on gender in the remote-future referred to changes to same-sex parent roles to account for nonconservation judgments. This further supports the finding that nonconservation of gender reflects an association between gender and kinship, rather than a denial of the permanence of gender per se. Future research on social role conservation might focus on interventions which would facilitate the recognition of single role conservation among preschool children.

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Table 1
Mean Number of Conservation Judgments by
Social Role and Time Direction

Social Roles	Time Direction		
	Past	Near-Future	Remote-Future
Self-Identity	.75	.91	.80
Gender	.90	1.00	.79
Child	.70	.59	.49
Sibling	.66	.77	.56